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ABSTRACT

Preschool children view television on an average of 4.5 hours or more daily, more than any other age group with the exception of senior citizens. With television viewing occupying such a great proportion of the preschool child's waking hours, the influence of television on the remaining play time, and particularly that of dramatic play, is of special interest for educators and parents. Dramatic play, the specialized form of symbolic play in which children pretend situations, is of special value to child development for many reasons. Such play facilitates the development of creativity, intellectual growth, acquisition of social skills, reduction of egocentricity and gains in Piagetian operations, and is generally adaptive. Research has demonstrated the effect of television viewing on children's behavior and ways that the effect of television can be mediated by adults. Other studies have revealed the influence of television on the theme production of preschoolers during dramatic free play. To put television viewing into proper perspective for young children, adults should limit television viewing, select programs that are less violent and stereotyped, always watch television with children, and encourage dramatic play in all forms. Child care facilities should not encourage television viewing. (RH)

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TELEVISION AND YOUNG CHILDREN:

THE EFFECTS OF TELEVISION ON DRAMATIC PLAY

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Television and Young Children:
The Effects of Televison on Dramatic Play

The presence of play during children's preschool years was unquestioned, prior to the television era. Children played in a variety of different activities such as running, climbing trees, playing ball, dressing-up like Mommy or other role models, bathing a baby doll, building a high rise building with blocks, or coloring rainbows. However, with more than ninety-nine percent of all homes in the United States now having one or more television sets (Singer and Singer, 1981), some authorities are questioning whether or not TV viewing is replacing play or to some degree qualifying and changing that play (Postman, 1982; Winn 1977). Preschool children view TV on the average 4.5 hours or more of TV daily (Schleicher, 1980), viewing more than any other age group with the exception of senior citizens (Postman, 1982). With TV viewing occupying such a great proportion of the preschool child's waking hours, the influence of TV on the remaining play time, and particularly that of dramatic play, is of special interest for educators and parents.

THE VALUE OF DRAMATIC PLAY

In order to understand why it is important to study the effects of TV viewing on the dramatic play of preschoolers, a summary of the value of dramatic play must be discussed first . Dramatic play, the specialized form of symbolic play where children pretend situations, is of special value to child development for many reasons.

Much research has been conducted during the last decade in the area of dramatic play, or pretense play as some perfer to label the play of children with the "as if" element (Fein, 1981). These studies, based on the pioneering work of Smilansky (1968), support the idea that the outcomes and correlates of dramatic play are of importance to, not only a child's social and emotional development, but also his cognitive development.

Dramatic play is the means by which children develop social knowledge. The "role taking" which occurs during dramatic play allows children to learn about adult roles and life around them (Smilansky, 1968). Children actually "try on," explore, and practice the different roles they see and encounter in their daily lives as they assimilate knowledge into their existing mental schema (Piaget, 1962). Frost and Klein (l979) agree stating that dramatic play is "a major avenue for integrating cultural and

social mores of the adult world while (also) developing language and concepts of time, space, (and) numbers.

According to Smilansky (1968), sociodramatic play, a specialized form of dramatic play which involves more than one person, develops in the child three main areas:

1. Creativity, based on utilization of past experiences and controlled by the demands of some framework.
2. Intellectual growth, includes power of abstraction, widening of concepts, and acquisition of new knowledge.
3. Social skills, positive give and take, tolerance, and consideration.

Without the opportunity to develop the above areas during sociodramatic play, children are at a social deficit (Smilansky, 1968). In addition, the particular skill of flexibility, practiced during sociodramatic play as children change roles and themes, is related to the child's later ability to play the "game of school" and to have role flexibility in adult life (Smilansky, 1968).

Singer and Singer (1981) suggested that children who engage in make-believe play are happier, have higher levels of self awareness and self control, have better verbal skills, are more flexible in new social situations, and are more creative than children who do not engage in

make-believe play. Dansky (1980), Fein (1981), Leiberman (1977), and Sutton-Smith (1968) concur that children who engage in pretense play develop creativity and flexibility, as well as divergent thinking skills.

The cognitive advantages of dramatic play are especially impressive and perhaps more quantitative in form. Studies indicate that children given the opportunity to play with various objects were later able to generate more ideas for usage with those objects (Dansky and Silverman, 1973; Goodnow, 1969; and Sutton-Smith, 1968). In controlled settings where children were trained in pretend play production, the results were even more significant maintaining the relationship of pretend play and divergent thinking (Feitelson and Ross, 1973). Pepler (1979) and Pepler and Ross (1981) also found that children who engaged in divergent play experiences performed significantly better on problem solving tasks requiring divergent, creative thought. The children in that study also performed better on particular types of convergent problem solving.

Other studies using controlled play training sequences with young children have found a reduction of egocentricity, an improvement of perspective taking, and cooperative social problem solving (Fein, 1981).

> In role playing, children may consolidate their understanding of person constancy despite role transformations, rather than acquire new information about particular roles. This understanding may involve the child's ability to appreciate the perspective of other players in relation to their real selves and their play selves and coordinate this perspective with the child's own real and play self (Fein, 1981, p. 1110).

Burns and Brainerd (1979) indicated also that children who participated in dramatic role-playing and role-taking were less egocentric and also developed empathy and cooperation.

Dramatic play has been linked to children's gains in Piagetian operations (Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg, 1983). Golomb and Cornelius (1977) and Rubin and Pepler (1979) suggest that during dramatic play children demonstrated or reflected their cognitive abilities. These cognitive abilities include one-to-one correspondence, conservation, comprehension of transformation and identitiy, decentration, reversibility, seriation, classification, and perspective taking. An example of conservation occurs when a child "conserves" an imaginary role identity or an imaginary play object despite contradictory real properties and stimuli.

While the above study indicated that dramatic play demonstrated or "reflected" the child's cognitive abilities, other studies suggest that

dramatic "play may be viewed as adaptive, serving not only to reflect the child's present level of conceptual skill but also to aid in the acquisition of further cognitive abilities through consolidation and practice." (Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg, 1983, p. 755) According to Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg, this encompassing explanation of the adaptive quality of play is the best substantiation for the significance of dramatic play during early childhood.

With the value of dramatic play thus substantiated, the role of TV viewing in reduction of valuable play time and the alteration of subsequent dramatic play sequences will now be discussed.

RESEARCH ON TV AND YOUNG CHILDREN

A large majority of the initial studies and some of the current studies of children and TV concentrated on the belief that extensive TV viewing of aggressive programs led to an increase of aggressive behavior in children's play. The classic work of Bandura in the early seventies, [which interestingly was banned by the original 1972 U. S. Surgeon General's Committee Report on Television and Social Behavior, (Liebert, 1982)], clearly showed that modeling of violent aggression on film led to the

demonstration of aggressive behavior in young children during a following play period (reported in Liebert, 1982; Singer and Singer, 1981). Singer and Singer (1981) in their extensive study over a one year period of time also found a correlation between aggression among preschoolers' play and the home viewing of aggressive or violent TV programs. Warren (1980) in a more general study found that preschoolers who were heavy viewers of TV exhibited more active, rather than passive, behaviors during free play in the preschool classroom.

All of the above studies analyzed the effect of TV viewing on behavior, especially that of aggressive or inappropriate behavior. Interestingly, children's programming is the most violent and aggressive of all programming. Gerbner (1972) reported that "98% of all cartoons contain violent episodes and the frequency of violence in children's programs is six times greater than in adult programs." Guddemi (1985) found that children, regardless of amount of TV viewed, prefer children's programming over any other one category of programming.

Another area of past study has been the effect of others on the preschool viewer. Katz (1982) stated that "research has shown that

children who watch television in the company of adults who comment on the programs' contents, format, and other attributes, learn more from their viewing than those who watch alone or with other uninformed young children." Springle (1972) found in a study with young children of low SES background who viewed "Sesame Street," that the experimental group of "viewing plus adult participation" as the only group to make impressive academic gains. "Children who watched on their own" and "children who watched plus did follow-up worksheets" did not have significant gains. The adult interaction was the key factor, not TV viewing, in academic gains in the study.

TV viewing has influenced the theme production during dramatic free play of preschoolers. Past research has indicated that the most frequent play themes of young children incorporated domestic life; i.e., enacting birthday parties, caring for baby dolls, or "playing house" with children role playing mommy, daddy, baby, sister, etc. (Garvey, 1977; Singer and Singer, 1981; and Smilansky, 1968). TV programs such as A-Team, The Hulk, He-Man and other Superheros, as well as other TV personalities have introduced aggressive and stereotypic play themes into the dramatic play

of children. Concern among educators has arisen since TV themes frequent the spontaneous free play of some preschoolers (Bardwell, 1983; Katz, 1982; Paley, 1984; and Robertson, 1978).

If children are modeling and role playing TV characters who are far removed from real life and not role playing the more traditional domestic roles, what are children learning about life? A few especially poignant examples were reported in Liebert (1982),

> In Brooklyn, New York, a six-year-old son of a policeman asked his father for real bullets because his little sister "doesn't die for real when I shoot her like they do when Hopalong Cassidy kills 'em."
>
> In Los Angeles, a housemaid caught a seven-year-old boy in the act of sprinkling ground glass into the family's stew. There was no malice behind the act. It was purely experimental, having been inspired by curiosity to learn whether it would really work as well as it did on television.
>
> In a Boston suburb, a nine-year-old boy reluctantly showed his father a report card heavily decorated with red marks, then proposed one way of getting at the heart of the matter; they could give the teacher a box of poisoned chocolates for Christmas. "It's easy, Dad, they did it on television last week. A man wanted to kill his wife, so he gave her candy with poison in it and she didn't know who did it." (p. 7)

One study indicated that the role-playing themes of children who were heavy viewers of TV (upwards of 3.8 hours daily) were predomiantely

based on television characters as compared to non-TV or domestic themes. These themes included the TV characters of My Little Pony, He-Man, G-I Joe, Dukes of Hazzard, and Mr. T. Children who were light viewers (2.0 hours or less per day) of television role played more domestic themes in comparison to other themes (Guddemi, 1985). In this same study, heavy viewers (3.7 or more hours per day) played less overall themes, less minutes per play theme episode and also intitated less of the overall themes than did light viewers.

IMPLICATIONS

Children presently live in an expanding technological society. There is virtually no way to eliminate TV viewing from children's lives unless to isolate them in a home without electricity. TV viewing must be limited, however, if dramatic play and the inherent values associated with dramatic play are to be realized.

The following are some suggestions and ideas for parents and teachers of young children in order to put TV viewing into proper perspective for young children:

1. Limit TV viewing. Adults need to be in control of programming,

rather than broadcast stations or children being in control. Do not allow uncensored television to become "background" noise. Select one hour or less of daily viewing or one long program on the weekend. When children view four hours of TV daily, that is nearly one third of their wakeful hours.

2. Select programs that are less violent and stereotyped. Pro-social programs like Mister Rogers or The Waltons are good choices. Sex-oriented shows; e.g., Dallas or day-time soaps; and violent shows; e.g., A-Team and many cartoons; are not providing good role models for children and tend to show up subsequently in children's dramatic play. Violent and stereotyped programs also contribute to more aggressive and inappropriate behaviors in the classroom.

3. Adults should always watch TV with children. Children should not be left alone to watch TV. Children need adults to explain and interpret the complex programs and abstractions. Adult participation also makes passive TV viewing a more social, interactive, and language-oriented activity which will promote positive child development.

4. Child Care facilities should NOT encourage TV viewing. Even though TV viewing may seem to be an educational activity, it is merely

passive "babysitting." Children need to be active explorers of their environment. Centers must capitalize on the assets of the facility, encourage staff to interact, and allow children to be active in the center environment. With cartoons being so violent, TV viewing of early morning cartoons while children arrive, a typical schedule item, defeats the goal of non-aggressive, prosocial behavior for the rest of the morning or day.

5. Encourage dramatic play in all forms. Children need many opportunities for dramatic play. Teachers and parents must recognize the importance of dramatic play and be dramatic play facilitators. Children need "starters" sometimes to get their play going. Set up the play corner with different props. Instead of always having a housekeeping corner, change the center to a hospital, a store, a post office, a veterinarian's office, an airplane. . . Don't limit children's creativity. Ask children what they would like to set up. Nursery rhymes and stories can also be the stimuli for new roles.

Research on TV and young children is ongoing. Other areas of research include the role of advertising and commercials, academic success, and sex stereotyping. TV is not presently going to disappear and

neither are the potential effects on children. Hopefully, by studying and understanding the research currently published, teachers and parents can make educated and deliberate choices about the role of TV in their children's lives and understand TV's effect on dramatic play.

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